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Activities of the United Nations Communications Group in 2002

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The United Nations Communications Group, which replaced the Joint United Nations Information Committee, was formed in January 2002 at the initiative of the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, United Nations Department of Public Information, as a flexible and substance-driven mechanism for inter-agency coordination in the field of public information and communications. It held its first annual session in Rome on 27 and 28 June 2002, set up several issue-specific task forces to coordinate the implementation of communications strategies of the United Nations system and convened regular weekly meetings at United Nations Headquarters. The Communications Group, which has evolved into a common information and communications platform for the United Nations system, has brought greater focus to the substance of these activities while enhancing the harmonization of policies and programmes.

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I. Introduction

1. The General Assembly, in its resolution 57/130 B of 11 December 2002, encouraged the Department of Public Information to play a key role in the newly established United Nations Communications Group and requested the Secretary-General to report on its activities to the Committee on Information at its consecutive sessions. The present report, which covers the activities of the United Nations Communications Group during 2002, has been prepared in response to that request.

2. The United Nations Communications Group, which replaced the Joint United Nations Information Committee, was formed in January 2002 at the initiative of the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, Department of Public Information, as a flexible and substance-driven mechanism for inter-agency coordination in the field of public information and communications. In addition to holding an annual session, the Group has created a number of issue-specific task forces for coordinating the planning and implementation of joint communications strategies on priority issues. It is also responsible for coordinating the joint participation of the United Nations system in the 2005 World Exposition (Expo 2005) in Japan. The Group holds weekly meetings at United Nations Headquarters to discuss issues of current interest. Its secretariat is provided by the Department of Public Information.

II. First annual session

3. The first annual session of the United Nations Communications Group, hosted by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) at its headquarters in Rome on 27 and 28 June 2002, served as a means of promoting a common sense of purpose within the information community of the United Nations system. Chaired by the Director of Information of FAO, it provided a forum for a broad discussion and policy formulation on general, as well as specific, communications and public information issues. A total of 27 United Nations specialized agencies, programmes and offices were represented at the meeting.

4. In the course of its discussion, the members of the Communications Group identified two major communications challenges: developing a flexible and task-oriented approach to coordinating their information work; and finding new, more effective tools to tell their story in an increasingly competitive media environment. The Group also identified the following elements as key to formulating an information strategy for the United Nations and its system of organizations:

(a) The Millennium Declaration and Millennium development goals should serve as the framework for overall communications strategies. At a minimum, the following four major issues, also identified by the Secretary-General as his priorities for action during his second term, should be at the centre of this framework: eradication of poverty; conflict prevention; sustainable development; and the HIV/AIDS epidemic;

(b) Issues of global concern were clearly connected with the twin strategic objectives of peace and security, and development;

(c) In the post-11 September political environment, the Western press, especially in the United States, appeared to be placing a strong emphasis on

terrorism. The information programmes of the United Nations system, therefore, must adapt to this situation by developing strategies to make other compelling issues accessible to the media and the public.

5. The members of the Communications Group decided that it was necessary for the organizations of the United Nations system to ensure their common response without losing their separate voices. They agreed to continue using the current flexible, issue-driven format of the United Nations Communications Group as the common platform for bringing partners closer, including in crisis management, whenever required and as early as possible. It was recommended that the chair of the Group at its 2002 annual session bring to the attention of the High-level Committee on Programmes of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination the need for involving communications experts in the strategic planning and overall decision-making process to promote a culture of communications.

6. The Group also decided to continue with its current format, which included an annual session at different locations under a rotating chairmanship, weekly meetings at United Nations Headquarters and issue-specific task forces. It was agreed that the second annual session of the Communications Group would take place in New York in June 2003, under the chairmanship of the Director of the Communications Office, United Nations Development Programme.

7. At the request of the Communications Group secretariat, the Evaluation and Communications Research Unit of the Department of Public Information conducted a survey of participants in the first annual session of the Communications Group. Participants who had previously attended meetings of the Joint United Nations Information Committee widely praised the reorganization of the platform of inter-agency cooperation on public information. Every respondent agreed that the current format was a clear improvement over the previous structural arrangement. Participants rated the opportunity to network with their colleagues as either very useful (60 per cent) or useful (40 per cent) for their work. In terms of the session as a forum for identifying common problems, more than 60 per cent considered it very useful; 30 per cent said it was useful; and fewer than 10 per cent did not find it particularly useful. According to respondents, the session was less successful at presenting best practices, an area in which the Group is determined to improve. While 70 per cent gave a positive rating, almost 30 per cent did not find it useful in this regard.

III. Activities of the United Nations Communications Group task forces

8. The United Nations Communications Group created four issue-specific task forces in 2002. As indicated below, two of them have completed their work, and the other two are engaged in ongoing activities.

Task Force on the International Conference on Financing for Development

9. The Task Force on the International Conference on Financing for Development developed a comprehensive communications strategy on the International Conference, held in Monterrey, Mexico, from 18 to 22 March 2002. These efforts

were strengthened by a one-page summary of key messages developed by the Department of Public Information in consultation with the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization. The message sheet was circulated a few weeks before the conference to members of the Communications Group. A press kit, developed by the Department of Public Information in consultation with the Task Force, provided succinct and useful background information for journalists about the key issues.

Task Force on the World Summit on Sustainable Development

10. As a result of the efforts of the Task Force on the World Summit on Sustainable Development, it was possible to establish greater cooperation between the media teams of the United Nations family both before and during the World Summit, which was held in Johannesburg, South Africa, from 26 August to 4 September 2002. The Task Force formulated common messages for the media on key issues addressed at the Summit, which gave uniformity and cohesion to the information efforts of the United Nations system. For the first time, a "bullpen" was organized in the Media Centre for the information officers from 20 United Nations funds, programmes and specialized agencies, where workspace was provided with telephone lines and high-speed network-based Internet access. The members of the Group also cooperated on a number of promotional activities, including the United Nations system exhibit and the billboard campaign in Johannesburg.

Task Force on the International Year of Freshwater 2003 and Task Force on the World Summit on the Information Society

11. The Communications Group has convened the Task Force on the International Year of Freshwater 2003 to coordinate promotional activities and generate synergy within the United Nations system in relation to the observance of the Year. The Task Force on the World Summit on the Information Society is engaged in coordinating activities in support of the World Summit, the first phase of which will be held from 10 to 12 December 2003 in Geneva, and the second in 2005 in Tunis. Led by the Department of Public Information, both Task Forces have continued to meet at United Nations Headquarters. Those away from Headquarters are also able to participate in their meetings via videoconferencing or teleconferencing. The objectives of the Task Forces include developing common messages for the media, establishing a calendar of activities and coordinating a uniform promotional campaign at United Nations Headquarters and throughout the United Nations system.

IV. Joint participation in the 2005 World Exposition, Aichi, Japan

12. The Secretary-General, in his letter of 31 May 2001 addressed to the Permanent Representative of Japan to the United Nations, accepted in principle the invitation by Japan to participate in the 2005 World Exposition (Aichi, Japan, 25 March to 25 September 2005). The Joint United Nations Information Committee, at its 2001 annual session, had agreed to recommend the designation of the United Nations Department of Public Information as the lead agency for the organization of the joint United Nations pavilion at Expo 2005. Later, the Director-General of the

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in a letter addressed to the Secretary-General on 5 November 2002, expressed interest in accepting an invitation from the Government of Japan to present its activities in an independent pavilion. Shortly thereafter, the members of the Communications Group reviewed the question of United Nations participation at Expo 2005 and reiterated their desire to present the United Nations system in a joint pavilion. They agreed that, rather than having two different pavilions, UNESCO should be invited to assume the lead in organizing a common United Nations pavilion. On the basis of this recommendation, the Secretary-General invited UNESCO to take full responsibility for coordinating the participation of the United Nations system in Expo 2005, including the design, construction and staffing of the United Nations exhibit. In accordance with the 1999 guidelines for the participation of the United Nations system in international exhibitions, UNESCO was to be responsible for negotiating the funding and related matters with the Government of Japan. The Director-General of UNESCO, in a letter to the Secretary-General dated 16 December 2002, accepted the invitation and appointed a coordinator for Expo 2005.

V. Weekly meetings and other ongoing activities

13. During 2002, the Communications Group, under the chairmanship of the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, Department of Public Information, held regular weekly meetings at United Nations Headquarters. These meetings provided a forum for consultation and coordination on United Nations activities of common concern, including the World Summit on Sustainable Development; the Special Court for Sierra Leone; the work of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East; the Millennium development goals; the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission; the reconstruction of Afghanistan; the Global Compact; United Nations reform; the twenty-fourth session of the Committee on Information; the special session of the General Assembly on Children; and web-related communications issues, such as Internet branding and a central Internet portal. The Group also received briefings from officials visiting Headquarters.

14. The secretariat of the Communications Group, with the assistance of the Strategic Communications Division of the Department of Public Information, prepared an annual calendar of major United Nations system activities of interest to world media. The calendar, which is the only annual listing of system-wide activities, was based on input received from the members of the Communications Group, and is periodically updated. In addition, the Communications Group secretariat, with the help of the Web Site Section of the Department of Public Information, has designed a new web site for posting all documents of the Group, including minutes and the annual calendar. The password-protected web site became operational at the beginning of 2003.

VI. Observations

15. By evolving into a flexible but task-oriented common information and communications platform of the United Nations system, the United Nations Communications Group has been able to put more focus on substance and to achieve

greater effectiveness in policy harmonization and programme cooperation in areas of system-wide concern. This format has allowed the communications experts within the system to coordinate messages, share ideas, exchange experiences and assess their performance. It has also contributed to the achievement of a much-needed goal, which is for the United Nations system to speak with one voice.